

How To Suffer Less and Live More (A Practical, Science-Based Approach)

Red Pill Theory | 18 June, 2017 | by Avery

It is well-known that thoughts create emotions. But the full consequences of this fact are largely misunderstood.

Thoughts create emotions, those emotions guide our behavior. For example, the thought “I’m never going to succeed at school, why should I even study?” creates emotional distress. That emotional distress can easily trigger coping behaviors like binge watching House of Cards or mindlessly refreshing Instagram every five seconds.

That’s just the beginning of the spiral, though. After you’ve been binge watching TV or staring at your cell phone for an hour, you’re going to have a new thought, “Damn, I shouldn’t have wasted an hour on my phone, I’m so stupid, I’ll never pass that class.” This thought creates more emotional distress, which leads to more coping behavior, “I’ll watch just one more episode” or, “I’ll click just one more link on Facebook”.

But wait a minute! Shouldn’t the thought “I shouldn’t have wasted an hour on my phone, I’m so stupid, I’ll never pass that class,” help motivate you to study? Isn’t calling yourself out in an honest way helpful? Don’t you have to fight your way out of stress? If we were completely logical creatures, you’d be right.

Our thoughts don’t directly lead to behaviors, they create emotions which lead to behaviors. This creates a trap that is exceedingly easy for us to fall into. The first step in this example is the thought, “I should be studying right now.” This creates the sense that we aren’t being productive enough, that we are screwing up; and the emotion we feel because of this thought isn’t motivation, but distress. What do humans do when they feel distressed? Cope. What are the most common coping behaviors used in 21st century life? Electronic media, food, and drugs.

This is a counterintuitive idea, but it has very important implications. In her best-selling book, [The Upside of Stress](#), psychologist Kelly McGonigal writes: “When I speak with physicians, I sometimes ask them to predict the effects of showing smokers graphic warnings on cigarette packs. In general, they believe that the images will decrease smokers’ desire for a cigarette and motivate them to quit. But studies show that the warnings often have the reverse effect.

The most threatening images (say, a lung cancer patient dying in a hospital bed) actually increase smokers’ positive attitudes toward smoking. The reason? The images trigger fear, and what better way to calm down than to smoke a cigarette? The doctors assumed that the fear would inspire behavior change, but instead it just motivates a desire to escape feeling bad.”

This pattern is a lot like psychological quicksand. As soon as we have a negative thought (like I should be studying or I shouldn’t be eating this pint of delicious Cherry Garcia Ice Cream), our instinct to fight it gives that negative thought more emotional charge. That emotional charge is expressed as an increased feeling of distress, which makes us think even more negatively, and before long, our head is beneath the sand and we’re suffocating from what was originally just a relatively benign negative thought.

Break Free



So, negative thoughts create negative emotions, which lead to negative behaviors, which create negative (“I should be doing something else”) thoughts, which create more negative emotions, and so on.

This is an extremely frustrating pattern that can easily determine our behaviors and the quality of our emotional life. The solution isn’t to learn how to think more positively, nor is it to learn how to control your emotions. The solution is much more obvious than the traditional approaches, yet it is also more elusive.

To escape the vicious cycle of negative thought, you must accept the negative thought *as it is*. In quicksand, to stop sinking, you must stop fighting it and be still with the quicksand. Similarly, with negative thoughts, you must learn to compassionately accept them as they are.

Once you learn to accomplish this effectively, you will still have negative thoughts, but they will drift away like clouds on a gentle breeze instead of darkening into a storm of emotional suffering.

The root of our suffering is our belief that we can (or even should) eliminate negative thoughts and emotional pain. The thought that suffering is ‘bad’ or ‘negative’ is itself a negative thought. This way of thinking makes stress a trigger for more stress.

To escape this spiral of stress and suffering that we get trapped in, we must learn to relate to our thoughts differently. Modern psychologists have developed effective strategies to accomplish this. [In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy](#), cognitive fusion is a state in which we become entangled with our thoughts and we lose the ability to distinguish between thoughts and objective reality. Author [Russ Harris says](#), ““In a state of fusion a thought can seem like: 1. the absolute truth 2. a command you have to obey or a

rule you have to follow.”

The solution to cognitive fusion is learning [cognitive defusion](#), “This is where we can observe our thoughts and see them for what they are – just products of our busy minds.”

There are numerous strategies that help us achieve cognitive defusion. Here I’m going to focus on one that is both easy-to-use and highly effective.

Labeling is a mindfulness technique that allows us to defuse from our thoughts, it helps us identify our thoughts as subjective opinions instead of objective facts. I recommend practicing labeling as a dedicated daily meditation practice (5-15 minutes to start), this will help you build it into a natural thought habit.

How to practice labeling



Either during a sitting meditation or any time throughout the day, notice your thoughts. For example, you might notice you have the thought, “I don’t want to be meditating right now, I have more important things to do,” to label this thought simply tell yourself, “I am having the thought that I don’t want to be meditating right now.”

If you are having the thought, “I am too tired to work right now,” label it by telling yourself, “I am having the thought that I am too tired to work right now.”

Labeling also works with sensations and emotions, for example, “I am having the sensation of tightness in my neck,” or “I am having the feeling of anxiety.”

The practice is fairly uncomplicated, and making it into a thought habit won’t take long (of course the

more you practice this during dedicated meditation, the more you will naturally label your thoughts in your day-to-day life).

Labeling won't eliminate your negative thoughts or emotional pain, nor should it. The point of labeling is learning to become aware of your thoughts so that pain does not need to become suffering.

Have your efforts to eliminate negative thoughts or emotional pain ever panned out? After years of struggling against pain has it become clear that the traditional approach of coping through escapism or self-punishment doesn't work? Maybe fighting pain just creates more pain.

Experiment with this technique and notice if it affects how you relate to your thoughts. Do they become louder or quieter, more invasive or easier to manage? You may find that once you start to create distance from your thoughts (without trying to change them), that they affect you less.

You may notice that you still have the thought, "I'm never going to succeed in school, there's no point in studying," and that thought may still be painful, but now the thought isn't you; it's just a thought, and the pain is just pain.

You may notice that you are now able to accept stress as something that happens, and now you can experience it without needing to avoid it through coping. You may notice that now your thoughts and pain no longer spiral into stress and suffering. As a result, the quicksand doesn't suck you in, you're able to surrender to it, and you can finally be free.

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